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Land, Life, and Security: An Interview with Edgardo Garcia, Secretary General of the Association of Farm Workers in Nicaragua.

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Abstract

This is an interview with Edgardo Garcia, Secretary General of the Association of Farm Workers in Nicaragua and Oscar Berríos from the Nicaraguan National Engineering University. The interview was conducted in Nicaragua in October 2013. Garcia and Berríos address the importance of organizing among formal workers and informal workers, and the shared conditions of both in Nicaragua. They highlight the history and context of the agricultural workers who began organizing during the national armed revolutionary war, the role of government to create conditions for healthy and safe work, and the need for workers to organize and advocate for themselves. Finally, they highlight the importance of solidarity among workers and the need

for alliances with unions and technical assistance providers around the world.

Keywords

agricultural workers, farm workers, education, informal workers, land rights, Nicaragua, organizing, training, women's rights

Introduction

Edgardo Garcia is the Secretary General of the Association of Farm Workers in Nicaragua where this interview was conducted in October 2013. The interviewers and interviewees were in Managua attending the first workshop of the Nicaragua “GEOHealth Hub” in agriculture and the informal economy. GEOHealth stands for Global Environmental and Occupational Health, a program of the US National Institutes of Health/Fogarty International Center. Hubs are centers which bring together multiple disciplines to study and advance environmental and occupational health. The agriculture and informal economy GEOHealth Hub was organized by the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua at León (UNAN León)/Research Center on Health, Work and Environment (CISTA) in collaboration with Boston University’s School of Public Health. During the interview, Garcia is joined by Oscar Berríos from the National Engineering University and a member of the GEOHealth Hub.

Garcia and Berríos address the importance of organizing among formal and informal workers, and the shared conditions of both in Nicaragua. They highlight the history and context of agricultural workers who began organizing during the national armed revolutionary war, the role of government to create conditions for healthy and safe work, and the need for workers to organize and advocate for themselves. Finally, they highlight the importance of solidarity among workers--particularly those facing chemical exposures and exploitation--and the need for alliances with unions and technical assistance providers around the world.

New Solutions: Could you tell us your name, and the name of the organization to which you belong as well as your position?

Garcia: My name is Edgardo Garcia and I am with the Association of Farm Workers of Nicaragua (ATC), which organizes workers in tobacco, coffee, rice, banana, oilseeds, and cattle. We represent agricultural workers farming small parcels of land, temporary workers, as well as workers that have some type of permanent employment within the agro industrial companies of Nicaragua. I am the secretary general of the ATC. The organization has elections at a congress every three years, and for 37 years they have allowed me to have this position within the organization.

New Solutions: What is the mission of ATC?

Garcia: We are from one of the most impoverished sectors of workers. There are others that are in extreme poverty, but among salaried workers we are the sector that earns the least in Nicaragua. Agricultural workers are considered informal workers, and so we have difficulties accessing social security. Except for the few of us who have succeeded in accessing social security, the majority of us are outside the system. We work to ensure access to programs, schools and services to benefit families, improving policies, increasing literacy, job training, occupational health certification and improved production practices. However, our motto is accessibility and the improvement of living conditions in the

countryside; that is our mission.

New Solutions: How many people are affiliated with ATC?

Garcia: In the countryside of Nicaragua, there are approximately one million agricultural workers, but we have around 50,000 affiliated members.

New Solutions: How does someone join the organization? Is there a fee for the membership or a cost to join?

Garcia: The minimum criterion is that each member contributes one percent of their income to their base organization or union. Our method of organization is to unionize in order to demand workers' rights. This requires organization by groups at the community level and the demand of services, for example, schools, medical attention, housing projects, and other services; everything that has to do with workers' living conditions and quality of life. We also organize around production. When there are small landowners, we organize to acquire land. We have accomplished this through the government of Nicaragua over time, especially enabling legal rights to land by women.

Agrarian reform was passed after the revolution of 1979, allowing equal rights to land for women. Some years later, laws were passed that explicitly recognized the equal ownership of land between women and men in the family, reinforcing agriculture as a place where women are workers. And under these laws, both men and women have responsibility for decisions of how to manage

and conserve the land. For example, if they want to sell the land, the woman has to take the final decision to sell the land or not. And even more recently, the law allowed women to have access to bank loans and there is a fund for the purchase of land by poor, rural women. Now that the law has been approved, we need to exercise our rights to land, in order for the law to be effective. So these are examples of our organizing methods at the department and national levels.

New Solutions: And how long has ATC been in existence?

Garcia: We founded the organization around 1975 and, it developed mainly during the grassroots uprising to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship.^a We were the protagonists of all the battles in the struggle for land in Sirama, El Viejo Tonalá, in San José de Bocay, and in Aguas María where Catalino Flores and Bernadino Díaz were killed in battle, also Nelson Suarez and David Blanco. These were all farmers, leaders, and promoters of agrarian reform. Therefore we have the experience of fighting, and of the struggle of the unions of the north zone, and also the struggle of the tobacco workers. Our movement grew within the framework of liberation theory, and the movement for liberation happening in the Central American region. That was very important.

New Solutions: And how long have you been working or how long have you been part of this organization?

Garcia: From the beginning, since I was an adolescent, almost forty years ago... yes...

New Solutions: [Joking. . .] Is that possible?

Garcia: Yes, it is possible! As Mr. Cesar Chavez said, “Si Se Puede!” Yes it can be done [laughter]. . .

New Solutions: And how did you start? How did you get involved with the organization?

Garcia: It was in the coffee plantations. I was going to harvest coffee, and there we gathered other colleagues plus myself; we were very enthusiastic. We sought different ways to fight for a just measurement of the coffee that was harvested, not one that was altered in favour of the landowner. At the time, the landowner required that when the amount of coffee in a box was measured, there would be two or three “spills” of the boxes, and the spilled coffee was not taken into account at the time of payment. This act and others was unfair and resulted in the coffee cutter getting paid very low for a box that did not reflect his cut. You did not need glasses to see what was happening in the exploitation of coffee cutters.

So we started from there. That allowed us to begin an agenda focused on labor, which eventually resulted in a struggle for the right to land. Because, if you have an income, you want to improve your income and your conditions, severance pay, and benefits. At the same time, farm workers were considered marginal workers because there are times that they are unemployed, so we

initiated the discussion of the issue of land. During times that an agricultural worker was not employed (not hired by a plantation), they would seek idle land to work. When there were few employment options, working a plot of land was the best alternative because they only had to wait three months to cultivate the harvest. However, much of the land was controlled by large landowners, and we did not have land to cultivate our own food, so we began an agrarian reform discussion.

At the same time, there was a growing awareness that the political space was governed by military command; the political head of the square, or the commander, exercised a surveillance system in public places such as streets or parks. It was common that if a young woman was going to work, as she normally would work in the cities, or if she were seen talking to someone, or if she were kissing her boyfriend in a public place, they would take her prisoner under the accusation that she was working as prostitute without her occupation card. The claim was that she was behaving like a prostitute without an official identification card recognized by the military to allow women to circulate, as prostitutes. Once she was in jail, someone had to pay a fine for her release. The person who helped “free” the women was the owner of a brothel, often the same military commanders, and then women were forced to work as prostitutes in the brothel until someone from her family could pay the fine, or until she grew old. So there were a lot of battles, mainly with the young women who came from the countryside. The women were trafficked as if they were cattle, from one place to

another. So, our agenda grew broader. We started with the measurement of the coffee harvest and payment, then we moved to the issue of land, then to family rights and women's rights. In this way, we built our agenda.

New Solutions: Thank you. What are the biggest challenges you see with regard to environmental safety and health?

Garcia: First is knowledge. It is very important to have a better understanding of the working conditions and environmental risk factors that workers are exposed to at their job. Based on the knowledge generated through research or workplace evaluation, we could create an agenda that protects workers. This agenda would allow us to create better working conditions that can help them to preserve their health. As well as every worker should be empowered about occupational hygiene and safety because if they have knowledge of how to identify the risks at the same time, they can protect themselves.

Currently, there is a sense that we are in a very precarious health situation. In the last forty years of struggle, we have been able to achieve a few things, for example, all the vaccination programs that protect us from various diseases, like poliomyelitis, malaria, measles, chicken pox, and all of those things. We have gradually overcome many of these illnesses. People from my generation still have chicken pox marks on their skin. The new generations don't have these marks on their skin.

We went through a very critical period of hunger and of hardship; we had serious problems with early childhood mortality and maternal mortality, and we also had serious problems with sexually transmitted diseases, many infections, insect-borne illnesses, and all of that. And generally, the people, especially the children, died of respiratory diseases, digestive diseases, and infections. With the central health system, there has been a fight for health and there have been improvements with these problems.

However, we were hit hard by the tragedy of Nemagon in the 1990s (Dibromochloropropane—DBCP) in the banana plantations, and then in the '90s, we were hit by the tragedy of the creatinine [kidney disease] in the sugar cane plantations which resulted in deaths among large portions of the population (see Figure 1). The disease originated from the work, from the toxic contamination due to the use of fertilizers and other materials applied to the land, and that resulted in a cancer or a rapid malfunctioning of vital organs of the human body. The creatinine is mainly a problem with the kidneys, but it affects other organs and creates stressful situations, nervous breakdown situations. I don't really know what the cause of this creatinine is, if it is the excess of that methyl parathion and other chemicals used here for the production of cotton, or what.

Dibromochloropropane (DBCP) is a pesticide used against nematodes that damage pineapples, bananas and other tropical fruits. It was introduced into US agriculture in 1955. By 1961 laboratory experiments strongly indicated adverse effects on rodent testicles, quantity and quality of semen and sperm. In 1977,

workers in the U.S. became worried that they were unable to father children. A study by the U.S. government discovered that in many cases the workers were suffering from deficient or absent sperm. While controls were improved at U.S. facilities, the product continued to be marketed and sprayed throughout the world. By the 1990s, tens of thousands of agricultural workers outside the U.S. had allegedly suffered adverse reproductive effects from DBCP use, including in Nicaragua. In the early 1990s, more than 16,000 banana plantation workers from Central America and the Philippines filed a class action lawsuit in Texas against U.S. fruit and chemical companies, demanding compensation for permanent sterility linked to DBCP. For more information, see Bingham E, Monforton C. Chapter 9 in "Late lessons from early warnings: science, precaution, innovation." European Environment Agency Report 1/2013. Available from: <http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/late-lessons-2>.

Creatinine is a measure of kidney function. Approximately 20,000 people are estimated to have died from Chronic Kidney Disease affecting primarily agricultural workers in Central America. The creatinine levels of sugarcane workers in Nicaragua are often screened to determine if the worker is healthy enough to be employed for the harvest. More information: The Guardian. "Nicaraguans demand action over illness killing thousands of sugarcane workers". 2015 Feb 16. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/-sp-nicaragua-kidney-disease-killing->

Figure 1: DBCP and Creatinine defined.

The problem of Nemagon is still disputed. There was a battle to discover the sources of these poisons and disease. It was always hidden and it has always been a popular refrain that environmental diseases are not labor diseases. Then came Nemagon, which provided evidence of a disease that caused paternal sterility in workers. The Nemagon case created a large political arena to go to the international courts in the United States among others, and at least open a chapter for discussion on this issue of environmental causes of disease among workers. Not necessarily for finding a solution because many times there wasn't even compensation paid to anyone; on the contrary, there were expenses. However, it got onto the agenda of labor health in agriculture. Subsequently, the ATC, my organization, actively advocated for the agreement of Safety and Health in Agriculture 184, approved by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2001.^{1,2}

The ATC and other agricultural organizations had the support of governments from around the world, including in Africa, for the agreement 184. Emerging from this human tragedy, in 2001 we accomplished two things. The first was the Safety and Health in Agriculture approved by the ILO. The second was also with the ILO in Geneva, when a labor agreement with Chiquita Banana was signed. The Latin American coordinator of banana plantation organizations [International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco

and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF)/Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Sindicatos Bananeros (COLSIBA)] signed an agreement with Chiquita Banana to defend workers' rights on the banana plantations.³

New Solutions: Your colleague was commenting about the need for training of the workers, training for the organization, and training for the members of the unions. Could you expand a little more on that?

Garcia: The basic need for us is information. And that happens during the education campaigns: publicity and tips that alert people accurately to their situation and its causes. So, this begins with evaluation systems and follow-up systems, balances, and agendas of our work in order to make it dynamic. In this sense, it is clear that the organization needs to have cadres that are informed and trained, people that can replicate the training, and these newly trained people can train others. On the other hand, we need a plan of action with other agents such as owners, government, and its services, similar to the actions of the vaccination campaigns in the past that eradicated respiratory and digestive diseases, but that are now related to rural land issues, and based on greater knowledge of the rural sector.

New Solutions: Is there training or education regarding worker safety, such as personal protection?

Garcia: We are interested in this area because there are a lot of issues... for example, the landowners, or the government officials connected to the

landowners, rant against the workers saying that we are unruly, we are abusers, and that we don't use the masks and we don't make use of any of the equipment they [the landowners] spend money on for us. They say that we are the ones responsible for the problem and not the contaminant. They say that we are the problem [laughs]—and that is the core of their argument.

What we need is to have a clear and serious system of training, grounded in our strengths, in order to be able to negotiate solutions and not complaints. Not complaints because this a terrain that they say belongs to no one--it is the *environment*. We need to find a way to say, "Gentlemen, this is the approach that we want to implement and combat step by step." And for that we need tips, campaigns, and we need evaluators, trainers. It is clear that if we do not have them, it is because we do not have the capacity. Therefore, we need support in this area.

New Solutions: If you could ask for anything to assist your organization, what specifically would you want?

Garcia: A training program is what we need. I think that there is a piece of work from the university [National Autonomous University of Nicaragua at Leon, UNAN-León], mainly Cecilia [Torres]; she did a great job in collaboration with us. So there is a technical systemized piece of work at the university. (Note: Cecilia Torres, MD, worked as a researcher and clinician at the Research Center on Health, Work and Environment (CISTA) at UNAN Leon until her untimely death in

2011.⁴ In addition to that, we have our own experience.

[Oscar Berríos, National Engineering University, joins the interview.]

Garcia: Good morning compañero, a pleasure.

Berríos: A pleasure to see you. It has been such a long time, and we see each other again in the area of occupational health.

Garcia: That is how it has to be. . .

Berríos: Excuse me for interrupting, but what you suggest brings up our past; when we would do training on fumigations, whitewashing, and provide the food, and be present in the training.

Garcia: Exactly, yes!

Berríos: Health worker brigades.

Garcia: Correct.

Berríos: Promoting primary prevention and personal protection.

Garcia: Yes.

Berríos: That's great! What a great opportunity to focus on agriculture and the informal sector!

Garcia: Yes! We are the ones who can solve the issues, on the one hand. . . On the other hand, we [workers] are accused of being responsible for contamination. We are accused that we don't shower, that we don't take care of ourselves, that we don't want anything in life. They accuse us of all these things. It is a classist perspective, discriminatory of the people, of the grassroots, saying that they are the guilty ones and not the poisons they work with.

Berríos: Yes, that's it. You have a lot of experience in this. It might be that what you are doing is better, it may be better to organize and provide resources . . .

Garcia: And bring more visibility to worker conditions.

Berríos: I remember doing an evaluation of the labor conditions back in the '70s, in Peru. We were invited by the ILO. They had thousands of cars to go do the inspections in the different locations. First, the Brazilian delegate was sharing his impressions, and then it was my turn. I tried to be as grounded as possible in our reality . . .

Garcia: Allow me to interrupt: Berríos worked with us and the Ministry of Labor...

Berríos: . . . The reality, I am telling you, is that we had to buy mules in order for the inspectors to do the inspections. They were using mules to go into the coffee farms, mainly, but also the cattle farms.

Garcia: Of course.

Berríos: Sometimes they had to go by river; they had to cross rivers to carry out the inspections. So that was why the union movement was so important. We had a theme, which was that the health of the workers be the responsibility of the workers themselves. But this was guaranteed by the popular Sandinista revolution. The person interested in taking care of themselves, is oneself, but there has to be a government that guarantees the laws and rights. That was the point. . .

Garcia: That is how it had to be. . .

Berríos: It gave us really good results, because we [the Ministry] could not conduct all of the necessary inspections, given that they were somewhat expensive, traveling by mule for several days. Therefore, we trained the health brigade workers so that they could do assessments. This was something that we did really well, I believe. Instead of this being a source of the problem, it became

a source for solutions.

We were also able to negotiate with the employers. Instead of saying, “This is wrong because it is wrong,” we instead tried to identify the problem. We sat down with the employer, negotiated with him/her in order to figure out what could be done, the pace, the execution, and it was a very successful way of working.

New Solutions: What do you think needs to be done today? You mentioned a very good experience, but what do you think could be done nowadays to continue to improve this area of occupational and environmental health in the countryside in the informal sector?

Berríos: Well, I believe that we currently have better conditions than what we had in the '80s. Why? Because at that point the literacy campaign had recently ended, I remember that when we were teaching the agrarian workers they barely knew how to read. A lot of time has passed. First, I imagine that the capacity of the workers to absorb knowledge is greater now; second, there is a much greater understanding of the concept of preventive health. Before, the focus was more on curing diseases instead of preventive health. Now there is a relationship: the citizens in general, and the agrarian workers are better prepared to understand preventive concepts. Third, and very important, is that we have union leaders who are well versed on the issues, which means that they know the topics and are able to prioritize the issues. Employers as well are more aware of the

concept of social responsibility; this is a concept that has come to stay in the world and in Nicaragua. The employers have a greater awareness that providing your employees with better working conditions not only makes your employees feel good, and feel good about their employers, but they also have higher productivity. So, I have observed that there are better conditions now than when we started, and also we are not at war.

In the past, we had to do inspections in war zones. We had to do inspections where there was armed conflict. Now there is no war and that, in and of itself, changes the landscape. On the other hand, employers have evolved a lot. I know programs from the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP) on hygiene and work safety, so I believe that a lot of the conditions are set in order to allow the process to advance.

Garcia: We need parity because we are not able to have meetings as equals with the landowners who set their agenda.

Berríos: What Edgardo is saying is very true. At the same time, that resources are being allocated to the employers, there is also a need to allocate resources to the employees and even to the governmental sector.

I'd like to highlight that the solidarity of organizations from the professional sector and the unions of North America have been very important. I remember

once attending a conference of governmental engineers of the United States, and this is where I was able to get information. In those sessions, I was able to be in touch with different people who provided information about pesticides and the chemical contaminants and the laws that existed in their countries. They offered us technical assistance. We had various meetings. We had a variety of encounters and at one time we had around forty specialists gathered together in an occupational health meeting, all from the United States working in different factories who shared information and strategies.

Garcia: That's how it should be.

Berríos: If the three groups (employers, employees, and government) have equal information and resources, each party can better play its role.

New Solutions: Excellent. How wonderful you came together here!

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Note

a. Members of the Somoza family maintained political control of Nicaragua from 1937 to 1979. Anastasio Somoza Debayle was the last family member to serve as president. He relinquished his office in 1972 but in 1974 returned to the presidency under a new constitution that permitted him to rule until 1981. Revolutionary uprisings and foreign pressures regarding human rights violations of the Somoza regime led to his resignation in 1979.

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American program on health, work, and the environment (SALTRA) since 2007, a member of the International Commission on Occupational Health since 2013 and a member of the International Society of Nephrologists since 2015. He is a founding member of the Consortium for the Epidemic of Nephropathy in Central America and Mexico (CENCAM).